

# Bug War

Pssst—They're  
Winning

BY MARK SCHOOFS

Last year, 60,000 people died in American hospitals of infections they did not have when they entered. Bill Dortsch was almost one of them. Hospitalized for a brain tumor, he got a staph infection that was resistant to antibiotics. Out of the entire armamentarium, only one antibiotic worked. Even with this last-ditch drug, it took Dortsch four months of hospital care to beat the bug, a strain of the common staphylococcus penicillin supposedly vanquished 50 years ago.

Dortsch's story will be told at nine this Sunday in the second part of *The Coming Plague*, a four-hour TBS documentary based on Pulitzer Prize-winning *Newsday* reporter Laurie Garret's bestseller. The documentary travels from Siberia to Venezuela to Tehachapi, California to show how humans inadvertently facilitate epidemics. Poverty is the greatest ally of infectious disease, but a new accomplice is the culture of the technological fix. While newly discovered diseases, such as Ebola or Hanta, make headlines, the biggest killers are old ones like malaria and tuberculosis that have evolved to flout our best drugs. "We have always talked about TB as a disease of immigration,

people coming to the U.S. from Third World countries," New York's Dr. Barry Kreiswirth notes. But "we in the United States have created the multi-drug resistant strains, and unfortunately, due to travel, we will be radiating these strains to elsewhere."

The problem is not the drugs themselves—who would return to the days when Chopin and Keats had no chance against consumption?—but the pill culture. Antibiotics have become essential to an economy that doesn't tolerate absenteeism, and to agribusiness that injects whopping doses into the cows and chickens that end up on our plates. But this widespread use—coupled with a disdain for prevention and nonchemical health measures—ensures that the microbes will evolve to escape the drugs.

Thanks to Lyme disease, outbreaks of *E. coli*, and even homegrown cases of bubonic plague, Americans are slowly waking up. But while we create most of the world's medicines and lead the market economy that relies on them,

we have been spared the worst effects.

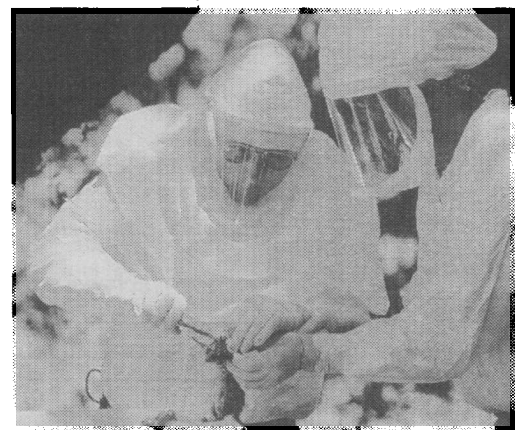
In the Amazon goldfields, hydraulic mining leaves stagnant pools where malaria-carrying mosquitoes breed. Miners, several of whom say they have lost count of how many times they have gotten the disease, take pills for only a few days until they feel better. They hoard the rest until the next, inevitable time they get sick. Since the malaria bug isn't fully destroyed by the short course, it evolves toward ever harder, more resistant strains. In the mid 1970s, malaria struck only 50,000 Brazilians a year. Last year, more than a million Brazilians got it.

Even if we catch up to where we were in the 1970s—the undisputed high point of humanity's struggle against disease, when wonder drugs were so new that microbes hadn't had time to mutate—we will never "win." Bacteria and viruses will just keep evolving. Or they will become immune to therapy through terrifying methods that scientists are only now discovering. Through "plasmid sharing," for example, one species of bacteria can bequeath its drug-resistant DNA to an entirely different species. And some of the most common drug-resistant bac-

teria—such as enterococcus—can live on stethoscopes and bed rails, making them a nightmare when they erupt in hospitals.

*The Coming Plague* is often superficial, flitting from one disease to another. But the show's blizzard of diseases—Lassa fever, dengue, syphilis, diphtheria, Crimean Congo hemorrhagic fever—emphasizes that we face not a single coming plague but an increase in the overall load of infectious disease. Drugs are still crucial, but so are holistic approaches: the most effective weapon against malaria, for example, is not medicine but mosquito nets. As overconfident politicians cut public-health budgets in the U.S. and elsewhere—and as millions of ordinary people continue to believe that a pill is all they need to get better—*The Coming Plague* offers a powerful dose of reality.

# T



Biologists from California's shrinking emerging-disease task force check a rat for microbe-bearing ticks and fleas.

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